



## **The Things That Happen** by **eliza dollittle**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Drama, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2017-12-19 13:59:39

**Updated:** 2018-04-30 11:00:17

**Packaged:** 2019-12-16 23:09:19

**Rating:** M

**Chapters:** 3

**Words:** 23,229

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** It had been some time since the gate had closed. Years in fact. The party had recently begun their junior year of high school. Things had settled. They had made the best of a bad situation, having gotten used to seeing El only twice a year. But for Mike, everything was going to be completely up-ended, because now El was joining the boys at Hawkins High School. Mileven Mileven

# 1. Chapter 1

Author's Note: I've been working on this ficlet ever since I finished the second season, some months ago. It will be 2-3 chapters and will progress to an M rating as it goes on. Cheers.

---

It had been some time since the gate had closed. Years in fact. Nancy and Jonathan were off at college. Steve was still in town, working part-time for his father's company and studying at the local community college. As for the party, they had recently began their junior year of high school.

Things had settled. One way or another, things had settled into a new normal. The party remained steadfast. Even as the boys grew and changed their loyalty never wavered. Through the unfair changes of puberty, high school, elective classes, new interests, and even girls, Friday nights in Mike Wheeler's basement remained the same. Maybe it wasn't D&D, maybe it wasn't atari, but the boys were there.

They had all grown. Seventeen year olds on the brink of manhood were quite different from twelve year old boys who had risked life and limb to save their friend. Dustin seemed to grow up first. He noticed girls first. His voice changed first. He became interested in music and joined the school band. Lucas and Max continuing an on again, off again relationship. It was the friendship Max forged with El that solidified her place in the party.

Will, the 'zombie boy,' with the artist's eye and poet's soul found himself taking creative writing courses, extra art classes, joining the drama club to help with tech. He was the town's Holden Caulfield. Mysterious, yet sweet. More than one girl noticed how he'd shot up from a scrawny preteen to a rather handsome young man.

As for Mike, the last four years had not always been kind. After the gate was closed, after he'd finally had El back, he thought it would be better. The year without her had been miserable. He had been angry and alone. He was overwhelmed with unfamiliar feelings and they would bubble over in the form of 'acting out' his parents had said. But she'd come back. Only for her to be ripped away from him again.

It was 'all for her safety' Hop had said. The buzz of scandal needed to leave Hawkins before El could live a normal life amongst her friends. She needed to continue to understand how to control her powers, how to blend in. It was the only way to keep her safe. Tracks needed to be covered, papers needed to be forged. It was all bullshit to Mike. He would never let anything happen to El ever again. But no one cared what he thought.

After the Snow Ball she'd been whisked away to place unknown. Well, the day after the Snow Ball, when he and El had been found sleeping in her cabin bed together. He'd biked to the sequestered shack that night desperate to be close to her. Hop had not been happy to see El in bed with a boy, despite both still wearing their formal wear, and insisting that nothing other than sleeping had taken place.

Then he was home and she was gone. They'd been lectured on the danger of sneaking out at night. The danger of pushing things beyond their understanding. Lectured on how if Mike continued to be reckless he could expose El and put her in more danger.

Mike had listened, clenching his jaw at the unfairness of it all, and grinding his teeth at the truth of the police chief's words. He cared too much for the girl sitting next to him to deny that they had been foolish.

They were gone two days later. Hopper had promised Mike that he would let El call the boys, and even bring her back periodically to visit. No more isolation that had been the lonely girl's life the last three hundred and fifty three days. Mike didn't like the situation, but he begrudgingly agreed that El's safety was most important.

So time passed. Hopper kept his word. She called him and the boys every few months. Hopper brought her to visit around Christmas time every year, and for a few days near the end of the summers, but it wasn't enough.

Mike was still angry. How could he protect her if he never saw her? He was distracted at school, angry the rest of the time. His grades began slipping. He started getting into trouble. The boys tried to pull him out of it, but they couldn't understand. By the end of eighth

grade he was given an ultimatum, get himself together or boarding school. Despite the rage he felt, Mike knew the last thing he wanted was to leave Hawkins and give up his only opportunities to see El.

By his mother's request he joined the swim team that summer. It was meant for him to work out his extra energy, 'his extra anger.' Keep him busy and out of trouble. Never one for athletics, Mike was surprised about how much he actually enjoyed swimming. He liked the quiet of the sport. He didn't have to talk to anyone. He didn't have to work with anyone. It was him against himself. He could pound out his frustration swimming laps. He could exhaust himself and finally sleep without dreaming of her.

With his coach's encouragement, Mike tried out for the high school swim team once his summer league ended. He made it. His grades once again returned to the top of the class, his anger was dissipating, and to his friend's relief he seemed happier. He was back to being Mike Wheeler, their unspoken leader.

Now as a junior, with three years of hard swim training behind him, excellent grades, and a disinterested attitude, Mike Wheeler was something of an enigma to the rest of the Hawkins High population. He was a top athlete, but rarely seen at a party or a sports event that wasn't a swim meet. He was always with his band of friends.

To the girls of Hawkins High, the awkwardness of his preteen years was all but forgotten as his too long, skinny body slowly transformed into that of a serious swimmer; tall, broad shouldered, and narrow waisted. He'd gone on a few dates, but to their chagrin, he never seemed all that interested, making him even more unattainable.

In the last three years Mike had learned that you don't always get what you want. After the Snow Ball things between he and El became more complicated. He had cared about her more than his young thirteen year old self could understand. Now he knew it was love. He'd loved El, but at that time sorting through the anger and the overwhelming amount of feelings had been difficult. He and El started to argue almost every time she called on the phone. Over stupid things. He was jealous. Jealous that she was growing up without him.

During a heated argument with Will about how Mike had been acting toward El, Mike found himself yelling, "she's mine!" It was then that he realized that he'd been trying to keep her for himself.

He had been so stupid and he finally realized it. So he backed off. He suppressed his feelings every time she would visit. Not wanting to sequester her off for himself. He took a huge step back. Bit his tongue. Watched her grow up and flourish as the world opened up to her. He didn't deserve her, and she didn't deserve to be kept in a cage.

She seemed confused at first, but never asked why things started to change between them.

They eventually settled into a somewhat tense friendship. Something far from what he wanted, but it seemed to be best.

It didn't help that she continued to grow more and more beautiful. Every six months or so when he got to see her it nearly knocked the wind out of him. She continued to grow her curly brown hair long. A choice seeming to be in direct opposition to when she was forced to keep her head shaved to make testing easier. Her smile came easier, her expressive brown eyes lighter. Her body...

Well, Mike didn't let himself think too often of how her body had changed over the past three years.

But now things were going to be completely up-ended as Hopper and Joyce finally decided that it was safe enough for El to join the boys at Hawkins High School.

---

Their excitement, however, was tempered by the multiple lectures from both Joyce and Hopper on how extremely careful they all must be to not bring unwanted attention to 'the new girl.' They had to get their stories straight. They drilled and drilled in the Byers' kitchen for two weeks leading up to her first day of High School.

"How do you know Jane?"

"She's the former Police Chief's adopted daughter. She used to come

around on holidays to Will's house. So I've known her for a while," answered Lucas confidently.

"Good," affirmed Hop, with a nod of his head.

"Dustin, why doesn't she seem to understand certain words?"

Without missing a beat the curly haired boy answered, "Her parents traveled a lot during her childhood and she didn't grow up speaking English."

"Perfect. Will, why do the four of you call her El when her name is Jane?"

"It's just a nickname we gave her when we were kids and it stuck," responded Will with a casual shrug.

"Right," Turning toward the other girl at the table, he quizzed, "Max, what happened to her parents?"

The red head took a deep breath and answered, "She doesn't really talk about it much. So I've never pushed it."

"Excellent."

The former police chief then turned to Mike, a new level of seriousness in his expression. "What do you do if she is about to lose control and use her powers?"

"Dad!"

Mike flinched at El's sudden protest at the turn in questioning. Her outburst was quickly silenced by Hopper's pointed expression towards the girl. Mike felt his mouth go dry, and kept his eyes focused on Hopper, trying to ignore the looks the others were sharing about he and the brunette seated next to him.

Chancing a quick look toward her, he noted that she had a blush on her cheeks that matched his own. Giving away that she knew the exact reason why Hopper was asking Mike this particular question. Although El typically had excellent control over her abilities, there were instances where things had gotten out of hand. Nothing like

that had happened in quite a while, but the last time it did Mike had been the only one able to get through to her.

His jaw clenched at the memory. "Help her calm down, or distract-"

"- Enough!" came her angry protest from his right. El's patience had apparently reached its limit. She'd risen from her chair, directing her frustration at her adopted father. "I'm not a little girl anymore. I have control!"

Hopper let out a steadying breath and turned to address his adopted daughter. "You may not be a little girl, but you're still a kid. My kid," argued the older man.

El opened her mouth to argue back when thankfully Joyce cut in. "I think that's enough for tonight. It's still a school night," she started, sending her own pointed look in the police chief's direction. The maternal sound in her voice seemed to break the tension that had built in the room, allowing the party to relax and collectively slump in their chairs. "You've all done well." She reassured them, placing a comforting arm around El's shoulders. "Come on, Nancy sent you some clothes. We'll go through them."

Mike watched as Joyce ushered El out of the room.

It was Hopper's heavy sigh, that brought his attention back to the kitchen. He hadn't seen the older man look this tired in a long time.

"We'll look out for her," promised Mike suddenly, standing from his chair.

"Yeah," agreed Will, mirroring his friends actions. Dustin, Lucas, and Max followed suit.

Hopper looked around at the four young men standing in front of him. For a minute he saw them as their twelve year old selves, just as brave and loyal now as they were then. A nod of his head was the only thank you he could muster at that moment. Clearing his throat he finally spoke, "That's enough for tonight. We'll meet you in front of the school tomorrow."

The party dispersed. Each heading in their respective directions, but

not before stopping by Joyce's bedroom, where she and El were going through the clothes Nancy had bought as a gift for the younger girl, to wish her good luck. Mike stood in the doorway and watched as they all joked about El's first day of school.

Mike felt himself being swept up in the excitement and took a step into the room to join the boys giddy antics, when he overheard Max and Joyce teasing El about high school boys.

And like that all the feelings and jealousy and possession that he had been repressing for three years came roaring to the surface. He knew he wouldn't be able to contain himself tonight, not when he was already on edge from the previous drilling. He looked around the room at all the smiling and laughing faces. How could he ruin this for her?

She didn't want him. Not the way he wanted her. They were friends, and she more than anyone deserved to be happy. He looked at her one last time. Her long brown hair had fallen across her face as she laughed and blushed at the teasing of the two other girls.

He couldn't be the reason that she was unhappy. Not when she was finally going to have a chance at the one thing she had always wanted; a normal life. So without a word he left.

He pushed through the door to the Byers and stepped out into the dark October night. It was too early in the month for it be cold outside, but he zipped up the hooded jacket he wore anyway.

Everything would be fine. He would figure out a way to get over his feelings for her and be a better friend. It's what she needed. What she wanted. He needed to accept it and let go.

Of course he'd been trying to do that for the past three years and apparently had made no progress. Christ. He scrubbed a tired hand over his face before getting in his car and making the lonely drive home.

El stared nervously out of the window of Hopper's truck. She clutched the book bag sitting on her lap trying to calm her ever increasing fears. Today would be her first day of High School. She was going to

start a normal life. Something she dreamed about ever since she'd met Mike and the boys.

Her knees bobbed nervously as they rounded the corner. The brick and mortar building that was Hawkin's High came into view. She knew it sounded stupid but it was like a fairytale castle to her, the ones she'd read about in the books she'd had to keep her company in between the visits and phone calls to her friends.

She was ready for this. She knew she was ready. Her private tutor had said so, and Hopper and Joyce agreed. She'd worked so hard these last few years trying desperately to catch up on all she had missed from a formal education.

Numbers came easiest, and she had sailed through her math lessons to the point that she apparently was now far ahead of others her age. Science was next, tangible and sensible. It was English and Literature that she snagged on. Reading took a while. There were so many words she didn't know, feelings she had trouble understanding. Phrases that made no sense, always having to ask Hopper about them.

"Nervous, kid?"

El startled at the sudden interruption of the silence. She looked across the cabin of her truck to her adopted father, Hopper, Dad. They'd each been uncommonly quiet all morning. Unable to break her silence just yet, she merely nodded her response.

He gave her a warm smile. "Are you happy, though?"

Her lips turned up to a genuine smile at this question and she nodded again earnestly. Her excitement overwhelming any fears she had.

"Good," was his answer. El noticed the proud smile on the police chief's lips as he focused his attentions back to the road. The pair weren't one for long affectionate speeches, but they understood each other's love in the small ways they showed it.

Pulling to a stop in front of the school, Hopper turned to face her. "Be careful. Okay?" he asked, and El was surprised at the tears forming in

her eyes. She gave him a watery smile and a rare hug. His grip on her told her how much he cared. Letting go, he ruffled her hair with a chuckle, earning him a roll of her brown eyes.

"I'll see you after school, Dad," she told him excitedly, wiping the evidence of her emotions from her cheeks. With a long exhale, she grabbed her backpack and slung it over one shoulder like she'd seen Nancy Wheeler do all those times before, and left the truck for the gray-skied parking lot.

"El!"

The brunette girl turned to see her friends rushing towards her. They had promised to meet her in front of the school and help her navigate her first day of classes. El let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding as she was swept up in hug after hug as the party welcomed her.

"This is going to be so awesome!" Lucas exclaimed excitedly.

"Best year ever!" Dustin agreed with a laugh. She looked around at them all. Will smiled at her reassuringly and she returned a nervous one of her own, grateful for her pseudo-brother's presence. Max quickly pulled her into a hug whispering how happy she was to have another girl around.

She and the redhead had gotten off to a rough start, but once El realized Max's preference to Lucas and her willingness to sit with her and watch soap operas, a fast bond had formed. Now she was her closest girl friend. But something was missing.

She looked around again. Glancing over everyone's shoulders, wondering if he was just hanging back like he sometimes did.

"Um, Mike?" she asked, doing her best to hide her worry. She turned to the boys for an explanation.

"I haven't seen him yet this morning," answered Dustin off-handedly, scanning the parking lot for their missing member.

"Yeah, where is Wheeler?" Lucas asked, obviously confused by the absence. "He should be here."

El tried to keep the disappointment from her face. She didn't want the others to think she wasn't grateful they were there, but Mike had *promised* her he would be here. He'd promised.

"I haven't seen Mike since last night." Will added thoughtfully, looking to the others who shrugged their agreeance.

Of course. Things had been tense between she and Mike for the last few weeks, ever since she had moved back to Hawkins. El hoped that seeing him more often would help things return to normal between them, settle whatever it was between them, but instead they had fallen back into an old routine of arguing. He could bait her so easily, and she had a hard time ignoring his moods, especially when they were directed at her. Which they commonly were.

And then last night when Hopper had brought up the last time she'd lost control of her powers...the last time she and Mike had kissed...

El tried to fight the flush creeping up her neck.

It had grown quiet among the usually rowdy crowd. The brunette lost in thought about how Mike had wanted to obviously get as far away from her as possible. She noticed the boys share a concerned look.

"Forget Wheeler." Max suddenly cut through the silence with a cheerful grin, wrapping a reassuring arm around the shorter girl. El found herself smiling as well. "Let's go find your locker?"

El nodded and the pack took off.

---

*"Find another spot." Dustin whispered adamantly, shutting the door to the pantry. Mike rolled his eyes and went searching for a different hiding place. Why they were even playing this stupid game, he didn't know. El was only going to be in town for another night, and they had the run of his house, with his parents and Holly visiting his Aunt for the weekend. All it took was for one of them to find out El had never played hide and seek before for that to be the events of the evening.*

*They had been hiding, and running, and tagging, and laughing for an hour now. She was smiling and laughing, so he would play this game until he*

died.

"Come on!" encouraged Will as he raced paced him for the basement. Mike chuckled as the distant sound of Max counting down rang in his ears. Okay, so he was having fun. Not that he would admit it. And maybe he hadn't minded the excuse to chase El down the stairs and grab her around the waist, swinging her around in his arms as she laughed last time he'd been 'it.'

Mike trodded down the stairs two by two, searching for a place to conceal himself. He found Will in the middle of the large room, circling. "Where haven't we hidden yet?" he asked with a laugh. Mike answered with an amused shrug. It was true, they were all a lot bigger than the last time they had played as children. Now at fifteen their creative hiding spots no longer fit them. This time they mostly just hid behind a couch or a curtain and made a run for base, which still somehow gave them a rush.

"Come on," Mike prompted pointing toward the basement door which led outside. It may technically be cheating, but desperate times called for desperate measures. They could sneak around to the front and get right into the living room which held the safe haven, the couch.

Will seemed a bit apprehensive to not follow the rules, but after one more look around the basement finding no new ideas, he followed Mike to the door. Just as Mike reached for the knob, the lights flickered. A familiar chill ran down his spine, as he looked over his shoulder to Will. Hopeful he had he imagined it.

"Did you just see-" the question hung in the air as the lights flickered again, but stronger this time. They regarded each other for a silent moment. Then the unquestionable sound of foot falls trampled above them. Followed by yelling, and it wasn't the sound of the happy shouts and laughs of being chased to home base.

"El," breathed Mike. The boys were in motion, sprinting back up the basement stairs. Mike was reeling. Images of the Demogorgon, Brenner, and the men in suits flashing through his mind. He pumped his legs faster. The shouting only got louder as they reached the first floor.

"El!" he yelled, searching for her. The main floor was empty. Where the fuck was everyone?!

*They followed the sounds of shouting to the stairs, where they were met with a panicked looking Lucas. Mike could hear the blood rushing in his ears as he demanded, "Where is she?"*

*"In Nancy's room, come on," Lucas told them. Mike didn't wait for further explanation as he charged up the stairs, Will and Lucas hot on his heels.*

*"It's all my fault," he heard Lucas explaining behind him. He sounded sick with himself. "She must have hidden in Nancy's closet..."*

*The flickering lights only added to Mike's panic. He could hear Max and Dustin calling El's name now, and the sound of banging. Then a sound that nearly knocked the wind out of him.*

*"Mike!" El was screaming for him.*

*He arrived to the room to see Max kneeling by the closet door, looking desperate. Dustin was pulling at the handle. Mike could hear El crying on the other side of the door, her screams, interrupted by hiccuping sobs. He thought he would be sick.*

*"It's okay, El. We'll get you out. There's nothing that can hurt you in there," Max spoke, trying to soothe her frantic friend.*

*El hated small spaces, and complete darkness. It reminded her too much of the sensory deprivation chambers that tortured her in childhood. The lights flickered in time with her screams.*

*"We can't get the door open. It's locked or something," explained Dustin as he tried feverishly to twist the knob. Mike was across the room in a second as she cried out for him again.*

*"El, can you hear me?" he asked the door, grabbing at the handle and desperately trying to turn it. His words were met with only the same fearful sobs.*

*"She's too panicked. I don't think she can hear us." Max explained miserably, tears forming in her blue eyes as they listened to their friends suffering.*

*"I'm so sorry," Lucas apologized again, his head in his hands. "I bumped into the door earlier when I was looking for a hiding spot. I didn't know*

*she was in there!"*

*Mike wanted to throttle his friend, but there was no time to waste. He looked at the door knob. It was like the one on his bedroom door. It locked from the inside by twisting the handle a certain way. Nancy's room was the only closet that had a lock, and that's why she'd been given this particular room, because she had been the oldest and deemed most responsible. As a kid he'd locked himself in her closet just to piss her off a few times.*

*She screamed for him again. "El, it's okay. I'm here. I'll get you out," he promised, praying that she heard him, and that she would forgive him for this nightmare. He ripped at the handle but it refused to budge. "Damn it!" he yelled punching the door in his frustration. He could feel the skin on his knuckles split, but he didn't care.*

*Taking a breath he tried to think through the sound of her screams, the flickering lights, and Lucas' repeated apologies. "There's a key!" It came to him suddenly. There was a narrow, silver key that looked more like one of Nancy's hair pins than anything useful. But he remembered his Mom using it to open the bathroom door when Holly locked herself inside and cut her own hair a few years ago. Where had she put it?*

*Think. He had to think. Mike turned back to the closet, it was killing him to hear her like this. It reminded him of when they were twelve and she'd called for him when the bad men had captured them at the school. He'd been too small then, too weak to protect her. But he wasn't any more.*

*The boys were all staring at him for instructions. "It's, uh...", "Yes! It was above his parent's bathroom door. Instead of finishing his sentence he took off down the hall for the key. He grappled at the trim above the door, until his hand hit something cool. Pulling down the small pin, he thanked God, and set back towards the room.*

*They gathered around him as he returned all watching nervously as he tried to use the pin to unlock the door. It wasn't a typical key and it had to be inserted perfectly for it to work. Mike hadn't realized his hands had been shaking, or how much his hand hurt from punching the door. "Shit!" he burst, as he tried and failed for a third time to unlock the door.*

*He was pulled away from the door by Will telling him to calm down and*

let someone else try. Dustin took over. "It's okay. I've got this," his friend reassured him. The curly headed boy kneeled down, putting his ear to the lock. Everyone fell silent at this, to help him hear the mechanism.

For Mike this only served to emphasize El's sobs. He found himself pacing the room, unable to stand still.

"Got it!" cried Dustin triumphantly, and Mike let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. The door was wrenched open.

The sight of her was like a punch to the gut. El was curled up with her legs pulled against her chest and her face buried in her knees. Her arms shielding her face against the darkness. Mike watched frozen as she continued to cry; begging now. "Please. Please, no!"

"It's over, El," Will reassured her, but she wasn't listening. She was so scared, so lost in her head. Refusing to leave her protected position. Max reached for her, but El flinched away from her touch, screaming her terror. She needed to open her eyes, to see that she was okay.

She called for him again, and Mike finally found his feet and pushed his way to her, dropping to his knees in front of her.

"El, it's okay. Open your eyes."

But she wouldn't listen, or couldn't hear him over her tears. The lights continued to flicker.

"El look at me," he pleaded biting back the emotion in his voice. He took hold of her arms, and she fought him as he pulled them away from her face. Hoping that the light from the room would snap her out of the nightmare in her head. He was stronger than her now when she wasn't using her powers, and from the small trail trace of blood under her nose she had been doing all she could to contain her herself, always afraid she might lose control and hurt someone.

"No, no!" she screamed, pulling against his grip. Her eyes remaining firmly shut.

He grappled with her as he tried to restrain her. Her instinct to move back into the closet. "It's okay. I won't hurt you," Mike told her desperately, pulling her closer in his attempt.

"Mike, please!" she begged for his help, all the while he was right in front of her.

"It's me! It's Mike, just look at me. I've got you," he tried to tell her as she continued to struggle away from him. It was killing him to be right there, just like last time, and not able to help her. He had to do something. Anchor her here. She needed to feel this reality.

Without further thought, he yanked her forward, his other hand coming up to cup her face. There, on the floor of his sister's bedroom, surrounded by his panicked and shouting friends, he kissed her. The world went silent. The lights flashed, went black, and then glowed brightly. He moved his mouth over hers trying to revive her, to bring her back. She was still for a moment, her shock evident. But then she relaxed and her mouth gave way to his, kissing him back.

He could taste blood in his mouth as he pulled her closer, bringing her fully into his arms. Her grip tightened on him and he felt heady. He felt his lips opening her mouth. That's when he pulled away, his breath coming out in heavy pants. Mike watched as she slowly opened her eyes. Her uneven breathing matching his.

"Mike?" she asked, looking as if she'd just woken up from a bad dream.

He continued to hold her close. "I'm here. You're okay," he told her with a nod.

Her eyes finally focused on him then. Something about him causing her to reach up and touch his cheek. Mike felt this heart rate kick back up. She pulled her hand away and stared at the blood on her fingertips. "I'm sorry," she repeated desperately, eyes focused on the red stain.

He pulled her against him once again, repeating in her ear, "I don't care. I don't care. You're safe." Her hands clung to his shirt. He whispered this over and over until she stopped her apologies.

He could feel the tension leaving her body as she relaxed, her rapid heartbeat slowing. She pulled out of his arms, and he reluctantly let her go. The fraught girl stood looking around at the rest of her friends in the room. Mike peered at them all from his place kneeling on the floor. Everyone had been speechless til that point having witnessed such an

*intimate moment between he and El, but Mike could care less as long as they didn't make her feel worse than she already did. Thankfully, their concern for their friend thankfully over rode their shock.*

*"I'm so sorry, for ruining the night," she told them despairingly. Fresh tears forming in her eyes.*

*"It's fine, El. You didn't ruin anything." Max broke through the silence first, comforting her friend, quieting El's unnecessary apologies. The redhead nodded toward the rest of the boys. "Right?" she asked them pointedly.*

*Then it was pandemonium again, as they all voiced their concern and reassurances at once. Mike stood, satisfied that El seemed to be coming back to herself, but he stayed close to her as she listened to their comforting words.*

*He found himself stepping in front of her when Lucas moved forward to desperately to explain that it had been an accident, and he was so sorry, and he would do anything to make it up to her. Mike knew it truly was an accident and that Lucas felt terrible, but in that moment he was still livid. He could still hear her screaming. His blood was still pulsing through his veins, and his instincts to protect the girl next to him was still in overdrive.*

*"Mike," Will warned, giving him a look to ease off, but it was El's steady hand on his arm that had him shuffling aside so Lucas could apologize.*

*Lucas was of course forgiven immediately, returning her own profuse apologies to everyone for what had happened, asking if anyone had been hurt. She was crying again but it seemed like grateful tears, for their concern for her. Mike pulled her under his arm and she hid her face against his chest as she wiped her eyes, giving the rest of them a moment to regroup.*

*They regarded each other. The weight of the nightmares of El's past hitting them in that moment. No one seemed to know what to say, so Mike just held her closer to him.*

*"You two should clean up." It was Max once again who broke through the silence, and everyone seemed grateful for an order to follow.*

*Dustin perked up at this. "Yeah, I'll make you some Eggos, El. That will make you feel better," he offered with a smile. Mike was relieved to see a grateful smile grace El's lips. The tension seemed to deflate in that moment and the party shuffled out of the room. Everyone but Mike and El headed down stairs, instead he led them in the opposite direction to the bathroom.*

*Mike flipped on the lights, and let go of her. She leaned quietly against the sink counter. He took a good look at her then. Even drawn and pale, with blood smeared under her nose and across her cheeks she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.*

*He busied himself getting each of them a washcloth, running the rags under warm water so they could clean the blood from their faces. Anything to distract himself from thinking of the kiss they just shared.*

*He went to hand her the damp cloth, to see her lost in thought. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice deeper and raspier than he expected.*

*Her eyes focused at the sound of his voice, and swept over him, pausing on his face. "You're covered in blood," she replied instead of answering his question.*

*"It's fine," he assured her with a shrug. She looked at him for a moment longer before setting herself to washing.*

*They were silent as she turned on the tap and splashed her face with cold water. Using the cloth to scrub away the blood under her nose, across her lips, and cheeks. Mike pulled a towel from the rack as she finished offering it to her as they switched positions in the tiny room.*

*Mike made sure the water was freezing as he washed off his face, watching the blood-tinged water swirl down the drain. Remembering the taste of that blood on her lips. He splashed his face one more time before taking the offered towel. She was watching him, worrying her lip in her teeth.*

*He wanted to say something to comfort her, but he found himself distracted by her lips. So instead he ran his bloody knuckles under the tap. Hissing as the stinging returned.*

*"Mike!" gasped El, grabbing his hand to inspect it.*

*He reluctantly let her pull her him closer as she looked over the bruises. His jaw clenched as she brushed her fingers over his injured knuckles. "I'm so sorry," she told him earnestly, fresh tears forming in her brown eyes.*

*He shook his head. "No, it's not your fault. I was upset and stupid," he tried to convince her, but she wouldn't look at him, instead focused on his hand.*

*"I ruined everyone's night," she protested, "and you hurt your hand because of me." She was rambling now. Tears spilling down her cheeks. "You had to kiss . . . You had to kiss me."*

*Mike hated the anguish in her voice. "I don't care," he told her desperately, taking her face in his hands, making her look at him. "I don't care about any of that." He wiped away the tears on her cheeks.*

*"But, Mike," she argued, trying to pull herself away. He wouldn't let her, instead drawing her closer. Their breaths mingling. "You don't want-"*

*He didn't let her finish the sentence, instead silencing her with his lips. She gasped against his mouth, and Mike couldn't keep himself from deepening the kiss. Their lips moved frantically as they pulled at each other, desperate to be closer. Mike was out of his mind as her small hands grabbed his shirt bringing his taller frame down to her. It was the moan from her mouth, when his tongue licked the seam of her lips that had him grabbing her and hoisting her onto the counter of the sink.*

*"Mike," she breathed, between kisses.*

*"El." Her name out of his mouth like a prayer.*

*"Mike." Her voice was different this time. Mike shook his head. "Mike." Things were getting blurrier.*

*"Mike!"*

*Mike sat up in bed covered in a cold sweat. He was in his bedroom. He had dreamt about that night again. Except this time Lucas hadn't come with an ice pack for his hand just as he had finished washing his face. It wasn't the first time he dreamed that he'd kissed her while they had cleaned themselves up. Sometimes when his teenage hormones got the better of him it was more than that. He ran a hand*

over his face, trying to wipe away the feel of her against him.

"Mike, you have to get up. You'll be late!" It was his mother's voice outside his room.

Trying to get his body under control, he looked over at his alarm clock. It was eight o'clock. School started in thirty minutes. He had overslept.

Mike sprung out of bed, tripping on the blankets that had twisted around him in his sleep. Shit. He was going to be late on El's first day of school. He'd promised he would be there.

Untangling himself he grabbed his towel and sprinted out the door.

## 2. Chapter 2

Author's Note: I'm really happy to be posting this chapter. I don't think it would have even been written without the encouragement of wynniethecat, my writing soulmate, to whom this chapter is dedicated. I had been sitting on my hands for so long about it, and she asked me to continue it at just the right time, then helped polish and amplify the chapter into something that I am really proud to share. She is brilliant and brought so much life to this chapter and it is so much better for it, so if you haven't already read her, don't be daft and go do it.

Also, I am the queen of romantic angst, so consider this your fair warning.

### Chapter Two

---

It had started to rain. The overcast skies finally giving up and pouring down on El's first day of school. She'd nearly laughed when she'd noticed. Because, why wouldn't it rain on her first day? The classroom took on the musty smell of old books and pencil shavings in damp air. The fluorescent bulbs casting an oddly warm glow, that made El, and apparently all of the other students in her English class, feel sleepy.

With her chin resting in one hand, she thumbed through her school-issued copy of *Macbeth*. It was like someone had pressed pause on time. This was her first ever high school class, something El had been looking forward to for years, but she could barely pay attention. Her mind, instead, taking her to thoughts of a particular tall, dark-haired boy.

He'd never showed. El had tried to not let it bother her. Everyone had been so amazing that morning. Making her feel welcome, pointing out places in the school to avoid, where their lockers were, and had even figured out a system to have one of them walk her to each of her classes that day. Despite all of that she still found herself dragging her feet towards her first class, secretly hoping that he would appear around a corner with a smile and a perfectly

reasonable explanation for not being there earlier.

But he hadn't.

She forced herself to keep her eyes trained on the teacher, who was probably trying her best to teach the classroom of sophomores. El didn't notice too much, her mind frustratedly focused on other things than taking notes on Shakespeare.

Why hadn't Mike shown up this morning?

The answer was too obvious to El. It was because of the kiss from a year and a half ago. She kept thinking that they had gotten past it. It was just something that happened in the heat of the moment. He'd wanted to help her and that was what she needed. Mike was just like that. He would do anything for his friends. She knew that's all it had been. Hadn't she made that clear over the past year and half?

They'd never actually talked about it, her being too mortified by how she'd lost control that night to tread anywhere near the subject. But he seemed fine with it, pretending that it never happened. It was obvious that was what Mike wanted. Kissing made things complicated. It could be good complicated or bad. She knew this from the television shows she watched. Sometimes people never spoke to each other again after they kissed.

Her eyes trailed around the classroom, not wanting to think about that possibility. She pulled the sleeves of the oversized sweater over her hands, a sudden shiver chilling through her.

No. No way. More than *anything*, she couldn't lose Mike. Not again. Not when everything in her life was just starting to come together.

She'd done her best to show him that things wouldn't change between them just because he'd kissed her, never acted differently, never expected anything more from him. Obviously she hadn't done a good enough job. If all it took was for someone to bringing it up again for him to start avoiding her, how were they going to keep their friendship from falling apart?

Was he avoiding her? She gnawed on her lip, feeling the anxiety

tighten her gut again as that option forced itself into her mind. Why else would he not have showed this morning?

She was pulled from her thoughts by the loud, harsh ring of the bell.

"Alright, class make sure you read act two, scenes one through three from Macbeth, for tomorrow's class."

El blinked, surprised that the class was already over. Everyone started rising from their seats, gathering their things, the room filling with the buzz of chatter. She'd barely taken any notes. Frustrated that she'd let herself be so easily distracted, she shut her still empty notebook, and promised herself that she wouldn't let thoughts of *him* sidetrack her again today.

"Jane?"

She looked up to see her teacher beckoning to her. Her stomach clenched tighter. She'd been caught zoning out. Bracing herself for a lecture, El made her way to the teachers desk as the last of the students made their way out of the classroom.

However she was surprised when Ms. Steckel only welcomed her to Hawkins and assigned her some extra reading to help her catch up with the class.

"Do you like to read?" asked the young teacher, warmly.

El found herself smiling. "I do. I'm just not fast." She admitted honestly.

Instead of the judgement El expected, there was only understanding in her teachers bright blue eyes. "That's okay," the older woman reassured her. "I used to be a really slow reader, but I found the more I read, the faster I got."

El decided she liked Ms. Steckel.

"I'm glad you're joining us, Jane."

"El," she said shyly. "My friends call me El."

Ms. Steckel smiled, trying out the name, and nodded, as if she agreed at how well the nickname suited her student. "I'll change it in my roster, El."

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad day after all.

El walked out of the classroom with a smile on her face, tucking the extra copy of Julius Caesar that the teacher had given her into her bag.

"El."

She knew the voice before she even looked up and saw his face. Her heart rate shot through the roof and her breath hitched in surprise.

Mike.

He was there, leaning against the row of lockers opposite her class, and looking upset... and perfect. His shoulders were tense and his jaw flexed, the muscles in his neck tight. It was so... inconvenient that he was so handsome. His dark hair and dark eyes such a stark contrast against his pale skin. She'd always been attracted to him, even when he was a scrawny, freckled kid. It was getting a lot harder to ignore.

Her shoulders sagged at the sight of him. She could feel her body letting go of all its tension. Relief washing over her. So he wasn't avoiding her. But why hadn't he been there that morning? She'd needed him. He'd promised. He always kept his promises unless he was mad... was he mad at her? Why was this all suddenly so *complicated*?

She looked at him, unable to conceal the hurt she felt from his earlier absence. They regarded each other silently for a moment, remorse heavy in his dark eyes. She had a hard time thinking straight when he looked at her that way.

"Mike, I—"

"El, I'm so sorry," he blurted, his eyes turning apologetic.

They spoke at the same time, and then El felt herself being lifted off

her feet, as he pulled her into one of his rare full body hugs. He never hugged her like this anymore. Not in the past year at least. She remembered the first time he'd done it. The first summer she'd come to visit. They hadn't seen each other in eight months. The boys were about to start high school, and they'd all started changing in her absence. Some of it she had been able to pick up over the phone. Their voices dropping, cracking ever so often. Their interests expanding what they talked about. But it was never so striking when Mike had come over to the Byer's.

*El had been outside on the dilapidated porch, enjoying some solitude and the breezy heat of summer, when Mike's family station wagon had pulled up. A smile came to her lips, she'd missed him so much these past eight months. She blinked as he unfolded himself from the passenger seat, getting out and standing to his new height. El thought it must be the distance that was playing tricks with her eyes. It had only been eight months, how had he changed so much?*

*She watched as he ducked back down to say something to his mother, before shutting the door and waving off. He hadn't noticed her on the porch yet, but she knew the exact moment he did, because a huge smile erupted on his face and his steps quickened toward the house. El couldn't wait. Abandoning her wicker chair, she flew across the overgrown yard, barefoot and smiling. Encouraged by his excited laughter and open arms.*

*Before thinking about it, she'd thrown herself into his arms, not realizing he'd had to stoop down for her a bit. She remembered the feeling of her bare feet leaving the warm earth, and the summer breeze whipping all around her as he straightened and whirled her around, letting her momentum spin them. She'd laughed and clung to him, just happy to have him again. No questions or confusing feelings to complicate things.*

*He'd held her for a moment longer before setting her back on the grass. She'd had to crane her neck to look up at him.*

*"You're shorter," he'd told her with an appraising look. Which made her laugh.*

*"No," she had shook her head and stood up to her full height, beaming with pride. "I'm an inch taller..." Her eyes trailed over him, up to his face, blinking curiously, her head tilting inquisitively. "Why are you... what*

*happened?"*

*"Puberty," he answered amusedly. El knew what that was. Hopper had started to explain it to her when she'd told him that the boys voices were cracking on the phone, thinking it was an issue with the device. Smartly, he'd called Joyce to finish the explanation.*

*She stepped up to him. They used to be eye to eye, now she could barely see over his shoulder. She wasn't sure why, but she liked the change, and from the satisfied smile on his face, he did too.*

That was years ago, now she couldn't see over his shoulder unless she stood on her tippy toes. As he held her in his arms, it brought back such fond memories that she nearly melted against him. He smelled like the crisp scent of body wash and the fabric softener that his mom always used. Ugh, it wasn't fair when he did things like this. "Mike," she grumbled against him, wanting to hang onto her frustration a moment longer.

"I know. I know," he admitted, squeezing her a bit tighter, before reluctantly setting her back on her feet. He stepped back but didn't let go of her, leaving his hands on her shoulders, something he only did when he wanted her full attention. Usually when they were arguing. Her only defense against his proximity was to let out a huff.

"I know," he repeated, shame-faced. "I promised and... fuck, I'm the worst. My stupid alarm didn't go off and I overslept and... I'm seriously the worst, I'm sorry. I *wanted* to be here, I swear, I was speeding the whole drive and I got here as soon as I could, but you were already in class and..." He had to pause to catch his breath. "You believe me, right?" he asked her, his dark eyes sincere and desperate.

He was telling the truth. She could always tell when he was lying, or holding something back. She nodded her belief and the smile he returned was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. She could feel the corners of her mouth tugging upward but fought it, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of her forgiveness just yet.

But he knew he had won and wrapped his arms around her again, his smile somehow getting even brighter.

"Come on, El. You know you forgive me," he persuaded, eyes playful and full of laughter as he rocked her back and forth in his arms.

She *loved* it when he was like this, fun and teasing, since she was so rarely allowed to see this side of him anymore. She shook her head in defiance, a real smile on her lips now. This only caused him to pull her closer and repeat an exaggerated plea for her forgiveness. They were both laughing, and pushing and pulling at each other.

"Fine!" she squealed as he started tickling her, pulling away. "You win! I forgive you."

Both of their laughter died down and they stood in the hallway for a quiet moment looking at each other.

"I am so sorry for not being here this morning," he said again, his voice thick with sincerity.

"I know," she assured him quietly. "It's okay."

He opened his mouth as if to say something else, but closed it again before looking down the hallway at the bustling horde of students. For a moment they'd been in their own little world, unaware of prying eyes and guarded whispers. The crowd reminded them that they still had things to do that day.

"Come on," he said finally, sighing as the moment officially ended, "I'll walk you to your next class."

...

El smiled, as she looked out of the window of Hopper's truck, sipping on the chocolate milkshake that he'd promised her to celebrate her first day of school. He'd picked her up with a proud smile, and gave her a big hug.

"How was it kid?" he asked as they pulled out of the parking lot and took off towards home.

"Good," she'd answered thoughtfully. "Not really like the TV shows,"

The older man let out a surprised laugh. "Oh really? How was it

different?"

"Lockers are hard to open," she explained with a frown, "and the time between class is shorter."

Hopper chuckled again but nodded. "Yeah, that's true, never enough time," he agreed. "But other than that, did everything go... okay?"

He always tried to downplay his fatherly concern, but El could hear the edge to his voice and quickly nodded. It hadn't been perfect but he didn't need to know that.

Instead she told him that it had gone relatively well, leaving out the stressful start and her reunion with Mike outside her first period classroom. She explained that she started out the day on her own, since all of her friends were a class above her. How she really liked her English teacher. That Will is the teacher's assistant in her fourth period Art class. Lunch had been fun but a somewhat overwhelming experience. Thankfully, Lucas had found her just as she began to wonder around the crowded cafeteria and brought her over to the table they usually sat at when the weather was bad.

She really liked her class schedule after lunch, because she had chemistry with all the boys. El was really glad she'd worked so hard with her private tutor so she could be in an advanced science with them. Then Spanish with Max after that. Her last class of the day was Calculus with Mike. They'd both had a propensity for numbers and each had separately tested into the senior level class.

"Speaking of Wheeler," Hopper started, as she finished recounting her day. "I didn't see him with the rest of your friends this morning." His tone was a bit harsher, the one he used when questioning suspects.

"Oh, yeah," she agreed, ignoring the involuntary increase in her heart rate that came with the mention of Mike's name. "He overslept on accident."

Hopper acknowledged this explanation with only the slightest raise of his eyebrows and a unforgiving, "Hmm."

"He was *really* sorry," she added quickly, coming to his defense. "He

apologized. Like... *all day*."

Hopper—for *some* reason—was always a little harder on Mike than the rest of her friends.

"*Like* all day?" repeated her adopted father, that teasing tone back in his voice.

She rolled her eyes at his taunting, allowing herself to smirk back. "All day," she corrected, mockingly.

They'd spent many a night watching teenage television shows together. She would try to pick up on how kids her age acted and talked before starting high school, and Hopper endlessly making fun of the drama and the 'valley girl' way of talking.

"Good," was his final say on the matter.

El turned to look out the window once more. All the things that had also happened that day but hadn't been mentioned to her father were running through her mind. The curious looks directed her way as she walked down the hallways. That she'd brought the wrong book to her second period class because she hadn't been paying attention—and to be fair the textbooks were the same size. How she'd used her powers once to get her locker open when she was running late to class, because she'd gotten lost but had luckily run into Dustin returning from the bathroom who had lead her to the right place. How she'd been asked three times by girls who didn't seem very friendly, if she was dating Mike Wheeler.

To be fair, she'd also been asked if she was dating Dustin or Will.

"Well, I hope you *like* have a *totally awesome* few hours doing homework," He teased again, as he pulled up to their house. El just stuck her tongue out at him. "I'll be home around six, okay?" he finished, back to all seriousness.

"Okay," she told him with a smile, before climbing out of the SUV.

...

Mike's lungs and muscles were screaming at him. He was pounding

out his laps as if he was in a state championship race, reveling in the burn. Needing anything to clear his mind from the last forty five minutes of school. No matter how hard he pulled himself through the water, he couldn't stop seeing Jake Struthers and Trevor McCalla, two seniors boys in his Calculus class, leering at El.

Flirting with her and making her laugh.

It had been a month since El had started school with them. He had thought—and hoped—that the interest in her would start to fade, but he had been deluding himself. She was far too beautiful to go unnoticed.

So it had been four weeks of absolute hell. Four weeks of random girls asking him if he was dating "that weird new girl". Four weeks of inquiries from his teammates of how he knew "the hot new girl". Four weeks of watching other boys hit on her as she cluelessly smiled back.

*"You're the new girl. Jane, right?" asked Jake, flipping his blonde hair out of his eyes and taking the table right in front of the one he and El always shared.*

*"Yeah," El confirmed with a smile.*

*"Nice to meet you," he said extending his hand to shake, with an easy smile. Mike felt the grip on his pencil tighten. "I'm Jake Struthers. I'm on the football team," he added, looking rather pleased with himself. Mike smiled as El blinked, obviously not caring about what team he was on.*

*"Jane Hopper," she replied, taking his hand and shaking it. Mike couldn't help but notice that he held her hand a bit longer than necessary.*

*That was when Trevor came over. He was also on the football team but was even dumber and more clueless than Jake. Total mouthbreather. How either had made it all the way to Calculus was a mystery to Mike. They each gave Mike a nod, with a jovial, "Wheeler," by ways of acknowledgement. The swim team making it to state far more often than the football team, and Mike typically coming in first place at his meets, earned him an odd amount of respect from the other athletes in the school.*

*"Are all the girls where you're from as pretty as you?" asked Trevor dropping into the seat next to his team mate.*

*The comment made El blush. She actually blushed! Mike wanted to growl. It hadn't even been a good line.*

*"You're coming to the party at Hillis' house after the game next weekend, right?" asked Jake, enthusiastically.*

*"Oh yeah," agreed his friend. "You've got to come. It's going to be awesome."*

*Only football players would think that party was awesome. Mike went last year, with a girl he'd dated for two weeks, and it had been a total shitshow. Just a bunch of jocks getting smashed and making out with whatever girl they could. He'd left after thirty minutes, the girl had stayed. Their relationship did not make it past that night.*

*"Um, I hadn't heard anything about it." Her eyes turned to Mike.*

*"Wheeler," Jake scolded, and Mike clenched his jaw. "I'm ashamed you haven't told the newest member of Hawkin's High about the party of the year. How inhospitable. Hillis' parents are loaded, and they always go on a business retreat the weekend we play Belleview. Everyone comes."*

*Mike just smiled, unamused.*

*"I don't know..." El started, and Mike relaxed a bit. El would never go for a bunch of stupid jocks.*

*"Come on," encouraged the blonde boy, at her hesitation, "Don't tell me you've got some boyfriend back home that doesn't want you to have fun."*

*El blushed again. "No, I don't have-"*

*"Wait." Jake's eyebrows climbed his forehead and he looked between the two of them. "Are you and Wheeler...?"*

*She flushed even pinker, eyes wide and darting around and as she shook her head, hand waving to dismiss the idea.*

*"—No. We're just friends. Um, old friends."*

*We're just old friends.* We're just old friends. Mike kicked harder. The sound of her voice repeating in his head driving him forward. He'd barely been able to pay attention during class. Noticing every time one of the boys had looked back at her. He'd had half a mind to pull her chair closer to his, but did not think that would go over well.

She had noticed his irritability, of course, frowning at him, the usual question in her eyes. The question he couldn't answer without ruining everything. And, god, her eyes were so beautiful, huge and brown, pulling him further and further—

His hand touched the wall. *Twenty.*

He came up gasping, leaning heavily against the wall of the pool as he finished his laps. His blood was rushing through his body, and he could hear nothing over the sound of his own ragged breathing. Exactly what he wanted. Turning, he pulled his goggles to his forehead, and looked around. He was the only one done.

"Nice work, Wheeler," came the sharp tone of his coach, who extended a hand, helping to pull him out of the pool. "I like your hustle today, keep this up, and we might make it to state again this year."

Mike could only nod as he worked on getting more air into his lungs. "You've put in the work today, go home and rest," ordered the older man, and Mike was happy to oblige. Coach never let them out early. It had been a long week, and getting to start the weekend even twenty minutes earlier felt like a treat.

He grabbed his towel, and headed to the locker rooms, scanning the bleachers. She was sitting in her usual spot, a few rows up, against the wall. Her nose in a book. The sight of her was like a soothing balm to his tense body. He really loved this arrangement.

Hopper had come to his house a few weeks ago to speak to him and his mother. Asking if Karen would be okay if Mike gave El a ride home from school a few days a week, when Hopper had to work late at the station. He knew that Mike had swim practice until five, and El was going to be staying late for some extra tutoring with her English teacher during the fall semester. That way El would be spending less

time home alone. It would be a personal favor to Hopper.

His mother had of course agreed, opening up her home to El whenever she needed it. So Mike had been driving her home four days a week. When she was finished with tutoring she'd come to the pool and work on homework on the bleachers. Waiting patiently for him to finish.

Driving her home had become his favorite part of day. He liked having her all to himself, even for just fifteen minutes a day. Sometimes they talked, half the time they bickered, or they sat in a comfortable quiet. It didn't really matter to him, he just liked having her there, next to him, in the car. A week ago she'd fallen asleep with her head resting on his shoulder, having scooted closer to him in order to stow her full backpack on the bench seat. He'd taken the long way to her house that day.

It was the most addictive kind of torture. Being so close but not having her. He needed to get a grip fast or he was going to do something stupid. He'd already nearly ruined it a few times.

When they'd literally run into each other just after he'd gotten out of the shower at his house. He'd only been wearing a towel around his waist, heading to his room to put on clothes when El had smacked into his chest. She'd spluttered her apology, quickly explaining that she had been playing with Holly in her room, before trailing off, red-faced. She'd seen him without a shirt before, but this was somehow different.

They each quickly moved to go around each other, but stepped in the same direction, colliding again. He could feel her breath on his still wet chest. Her hands that had come up to brace herself, accidentally brushing his abdomen. It raised goosebumps on his skin. Her gasp was a far too pleasant sound to his ears. Knowing the evidence of being so close to her was soon going to be painfully obvious, he had barked at her 'to just pick a fucking side,' and slid past her as quickly as he could. Having then to deal with the hardest erection of his life once alone in the safety of his room.

Or when he'd been helping her with a difficult Calculus problem and she'd refused to believe that she was wrong, and they'd wrestled over

the calculator until she'd pinned him down, laughing triumphantly as she straddled his waist. He'd snapped at her to get off like a total jackass. She'd looked so wounded, but god damn it, how was he supposed to deal with her *climbing on top of him*?

But the worst had been last week, at school, when she'd shown up wearing the cutest dress he'd ever seen and then had the audacity to ask him if he liked it.

"U-Uh," he'd stammered, *feeling brainless and awkward. "It's... fine. I guess."*

*Her eyes flashed disappointment but he couldn't tell her the truth, that she was the most beautiful thing in the entire world and that her legs looked amazing and that the shade of blue made her hair look like curls of golden brown honey.*

Why did she have to make everything so... hard?

He towed off and changed back into his clothes. Everyone was coming over to his house that night to hang out, so El would just be coming home with him and staying. That would help. They would hang out and everything would go back to normal. He'd been pretty short with her at the end of calculus, but she'd hopefully forgotten that by now.

Yeah, they'd have fun tonight and it would all be fine.

He got back to pool to find her surrounded by three boys from the swim team. She remained seated as they all stood around her. His optimism quickly forgotten, replaced by the familiar jealousy that burned low in his gut.

"You should join the team."

Mike heard his team mate Carter suggest as he reached the small crowd. The other boys voiced their enthusiastic agreeance and he saw her turning pink again, that cute flush filling her cheeks as she shook her head. Mike rolled his eyes, knowing they all were far more interested in her form in a bathing suit, than the form of her backstroke.

El just smiled, shaking her head again. "I don't know how to swim."

"We could teach—"

"—are you ready to go?" Mike interrupted having heard enough, cutting through the group of boys to stand directly in front of her. Like hell he was going to let any of *them* be alone with her in a swimsuit.

"Oh, Mike," she said, obviously surprised by his sudden presence. "Uh... yeah."

El gathered up her things and stood. She looked at him curiously, but Mike ignored her probing gaze, too surly to care if he was being rude in that moment. "Let's go."

She said goodbye to his teammates, who all returned their own way-too-enthusiastic farewells, eyes watching hungrily as she climbed off of the bleachers. Mike couldn't stop himself from putting a territorial hand on her shoulder as they left the pool. If he had to watch *one* more guy hit on El today he was going to lose it.

The moment they reached the parking lot she shoved his hand off her and shot him a death glare. He immediately bristled at her expression.

"What is your *problem*, Mike?" she huffed as she went around to the passenger side.

"My problem?" He scowled at her over the car in disbelief. "Are you kidding me?!"

They each slammed their way into his tan Dodge Monaco, the old sedan rocking from the impact of their shared frustration. It had been taking similar abuse all month.

"I didn't do anything wrong," she argued, struggling furiously with her seat belt. "You're being a jerk. In Calc... and now with your teammates. They were just... being nice!"

"Ha! Yeah sure, *nice*. They were just being *nice*." Mike slammed the car into drive. *He* was the jerk? "You really don't—"

He managed to cut himself off before he angrily spewed the real reason he was so worked up. Did she really not realize just how hard guys tried around her? That the motivation behind how "nicely" they were treating her wasn't so pure? Sometimes it drove him nuts how innocent she was.

"I don't what?" She stared at him as he drove, eyes narrowed. "Tell me."

"It's nothing. Forget it."

"Tell me."

"It's *nothing*, El," he insisted.

"Stop lying."

"I'm..." He swallowed, keeping his eyes on the road, feeling the anger rise again at her pushing. Why couldn't she just *let it go*? "Just forget it! I already said it's nothing!"

El let out an unconvinced laugh. "Friends don't lie, Mike," she reminded him, crossing her arms as she threw his own words back in his face.

Mike struggled against his temper and whatever else was boiling in his gut. "I'm not lying," he refuted hotly, "I just want you to stop—"

"I can't stay locked up," she spat, hurt seeping into the anger as her voice quieted, "I just... I can't, Mike. Even if you don't want me at school with you."

"Of *course* I want you at school," he told her impatiently, wondering how she could possibly think that was the issue here, "I always want you with me."

The last sentence slipped out before he could stop it.

"Then what's *wrong*?" she pleaded with him, her brown eyes piercing his. God, he had no defense against her. He stared back at the road, unable to withstand her searching gaze. "I won't lose control," she reassured him. "You won't have to—"

"—no, that's not... what I'm worried about," Mike tried to explain. "That *definitely* wasn't the problem," he thought as his mind was flooded with the memory of her lips against his making his blood rush all over his body.`

They suddenly both wore matching blushes. Mike internally cursed Hopper for bringing up the last time that had happened. He ran an anxious hand through his hair, trying to think of a way that would explain his concern for her without giving away his feelings.

"I can't hide forever," she repeated, growing frustrated again as he stayed silent.

Mike sighed heavily as they pulled into the driveway of his house, "I know. That's not what I want."

"Then what do you *want*, Mike?" she asked desperately.

He put the car in park and they sat there in silence. The question hung in the air causing the atmosphere to electrify. Could he say what he wanted was her? That his bad moods were just years of all his pent up feelings he'd been denying?

His heart started racing and he licked his lips, pausing, feeling torn. Would that be the worst thing he could do? Admit just how much she meant to him?

"Hey, El!"

The pair jumped, looking out the passenger seat to see the sweet face of Holly, Mike's nine year old sister. El immediately schooled her features into a bright smile, greeting the younger girl. She tossed one more angry glare at Mike before, opening the door and climbing out, pulling the younger girl into a hug, and walking with her back to the house.

Mike watched from the driver's seat as El ushered his sister inside. His heart was still racing and his body humming with frustration. He gripped the wheel of his parked car watching his knuckles whiten. He was such an idiot. He'd almost told her *everything*. If Holly hadn't come round, he was sure he was about to confess.

Then what? She would tell him that she didn't see him that way? She would ask him to take her home? She would stop talking to him and would have to avoid all of her friends to stay away from him. He would ruin everything. It wasn't fair to her. He slammed a hand against the wheel, hard enough to make his wrist throb. Glancing over again at the spot where she'd been sitting only moments before, his eyes fell on her pink canvas backpack still sitting on the floor, left behind in her huff of rage.

With a sigh he reached down and picked it up, climbing slowly out of his Monaco and ignoring the flare of pain that shot up his hand.

He found El in the kitchen talking to his mom and set her backpack on the floor, unnoticed. There was a plate of freshly baked cookies on the counter and they were each enjoying one and chatting happily.

His mom really liked El. Once Hopper gave an alternative explanation of what El had been through as a young child, and that she was not actually a Soviet spy, his Mom embraced the girl with open arms, seeming to want to make up for all the wrongs done to her. He loved his mom even more for it.

El's only acknowledgement to his entrance into the kitchen was to stiffen. He noticed his mom's eyes shift curiously between the pair, before greeting her son.

"I wasn't expecting the two of you home so soon," said Karen, as she poured El a glass of milk.

"Yeah, Coach let me out early," he explained, grabbing four cookies and shoving one in his mouth. "Which is great, because I'm exhausted and starving," he mumbled through a full mouth, realizing suddenly just how true his words were. He'd pushed himself way too hard at swim practice and now the adrenaline from he and El's argument was wearing off leaving him feeling spent.

"Hey, put those back," his mother ordered, gesturing to the three cookies in his hand that he was about to demolish. "Only one for you. If you're that hungry make a sandwich."

Mike grumbled, but put the cookies back and walked over to the

fridge and started pulling out ingredients. He set it all out on the counter and started to assemble his food.

"Here, El sweetie, have another," Karen offered pushing the plate in front of the girl.

"Mom?!"

"What?" his mother asked calmly, turning to her son. "El can have as many cookies as she wants. She doesn't eat us out of house and home and she actually likes to help me cook," his mother told him matter-of-factly. "Besides, my house, my rules."

Over his mother's shoulder he caught eyes with El, who gave him a triumphant smile and took another cookie, taking great effort to convey how delicious it was. He sent her a narrow eyed look before returning to stacking as many ingredients on his sandwich as possible.

"Some days, I think you love her more than me," he argued petulantly, finishing and taking an aggressive bite of his sandwich.

His mom just smiled at him adoringly, "Some days when my pantry is empty and my grocery bill is double, I do."

El giggled at this. Mike rolled his eyes. "You're the one who made your growing teenage son go out for the swim team," he defended.

His mother only smiled brighter at the argument. "And look how well that turned out," she cooed, taking his face in her hands, ignoring his purposely obnoxious chewing. "You're one of the best on the team, you're top of your class, and you've grown up to be so handsome."

"Mom," groaned Mike. He hated when she gushed like this.

"Isn't he handsome, El?" she asked the girl over her shoulder, ignoring his protests.

"Mom!"

"What? You don't think you're handsome? Tell him how handsome he is, El."

"Oh my god, Mom!"

But Karen Wheeler ignored her son's discomfort, looking over her shoulder to the girl at the counter. Mike couldn't meet El's eyes, his face turning hot. His mother was trying to kill him. He always knew Nancy was the favorite.

"Very handsome," El appeased, and despite Mike knowing she was just saying that to please his mother, he couldn't help but glance at her. She too was blushing, tucking her long brown hair behind her ear, her discomfort obvious.

"Okay, I'll stop," his mom relented with a teasing smile, releasing Mike's face and moving to the counter to put away the sandwich makings that had been left out. Mike still couldn't bring himself to look at El again, so instead focused on polishing off his food, cramming as much of it into his mouth as possible before swallowing painfully. "So, how was school today?"

"—*Fine*." The high schoolers answered in unison, their gazes snapping to each other, surprised by their oddly matching response. The forced, almost panicked tone both had used was evidence that their day had been *anything* but fine. So much so that the older woman stopped her chore to turn and look at the pair. Her eyebrows raised in interest.

"I should shower," Mike spoke quickly, cutting off any questions his mother might ask.

"And I should finish my homework," added El, standing from the counter and noticing her bag on the floor, she quickly snatched it up. "Thank you for the cookies Mrs. Wheeler. They were delicious." She gave his mom a grateful smile, and headed down to the basement, not sparing Mike even a glance.

Mike watched her leave out of the corner of his eye. God, today was such a mess. Letting out a sigh, he grabbed his own bags and headed for the stairs.

"Michael Edward Wheeler."

Full name. He was in for it. He turned back to his mother's expectant stare.

"What?" he asked, exhaustion creeping into this words, making them sharper.

His mom, used to his moods, didn't even bat an eye. "What did you do?"

"Me?" asked Mike, immediately defensive. "Why do you assume *I* did something wrong?"

She gave her son a knowing look, replying, "You two are fighting, aren't you?" His silence was the only affirmation she needed. "She's a sweet girl, Michael."

"I know," he agreed tensely, scrubbing a tired hand over his face. He didn't need any more grief about this, he already felt terrible.

"Maybe," his mom started, her tone far gentler now, an understanding look on her face, "you could just tell her how you feel?"

He stared numbly at his mom. They'd never talked about his feelings for El before, but it was obvious she knew that what he felt for that girl went far deeper than friendship. What she didn't know was that El didn't feel that way about him. Just because his mom would like for them to date, a notion she'd hinted at it multiple times, didn't mean it could happen.

Mike huffed, looking off into the living room, unable to meet his mother's probing gaze. "I need to shower," was the only response he could give her, the sharpness in his voice gone.

He didn't see her sympathetic nod, only hearing her reminder that there were fresh towels in the linen closet, as he set off for the upstairs bathroom.

...

Mike took his time in the shower, letting the hot water relax his muscles. His limbs felt heavy after the intensity of swim practice, and he hoped the steam would clear his head. He needed to apologize to

El. He'd been jealous and acted like a jerk, just like she'd said. She thought he didn't want her to go to school with him?! Fuck, he was such an asshole.

He *had* to let go of his feelings for her or he would ruin everything between them. He was already self-destructing and she'd only been at school with them for a month. Why had he thought seeing her more often would make it easier? It just made him want her more.

She was just so beautiful and perfect, how could he not want her? Even when they were arguing he could barely control his attraction. Fuck, *especially* when they were arguing. Her amber brown eyes bright with emotion, cheeks rosy from frustration. The way she would square her shoulders, her jaw set in defiance. He had a hard time not baiting her, craving her attention and she had no problem putting him in his place.

He remembered a few days ago, when he'd actually argued with her over how to open jar of fucking peanut butter. Even then, her eyes had glowed in the way that seemed to egg him on. The hand that had pushed against his chest, as she dodged away from his attempt to take the jar and open it for her, lighting him on fire. Her skirt swirling up around her legs when she'd whipped around to stalk away from him.

Fuck, she had nice legs.

She had nice *everything*.

His gaze drifted down and he realized he was hard as a rock. He groaned in annoyance at himself for letting his mind wander. Reaching for the faucet, he turned the spray colder, hoping to calm his suddenly aching body.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the tile wall, trying conjure anything to his mind to replace the memory of her legs, long and bare in her skirt, or the feel of her lips on his.

His favorite scene in Ghostbusters. The campaign he'd been working on for tonight. The dead creatures that had stared at him from the pages of his lore guide...

Damn it. It wasn't working. His hand drifted down. He shouldn't. He'd promised himself he wouldn't.

But the memory of how she'd tasted when he'd kissed her, sweet somehow, contrasted by the coppery zing from her bleeding nose, forged its way forward. Her lips soft, pliant under his own. His mind taking him to one of the many dreams he'd had about that night. Kissing her again in the bathroom like he should have, but this time grabbing her thighs and pulling them up, around his waist, hearing her whimper as their centers met. Turning, he sat them down on the closed toilet seat, her above him, straddling his lap, her eyes hazy and full of want, his hands moving up, under her skirt.

He gripped his hardness in his hand and pumped slowly, exhaling heavily as he imagined pulling her closer to him, his lips on hers, his tongue tracing the seam where they met. How she would open for him, her small hands gripping him and inviting him closer, further in to her.

His hand moved faster, as his hips bucked against her in his dream. She gasped, her pink lips parting to whisper his name. Her skirt moving up, her warm skin inviting him in as she clenched her thighs around him, eyes pleading.

She's begging for *him*, whispering how much she wants him.

A low groan left his throat, drowned out by the sound of the water pounding the floor of the shower, his unoccupied hand bracing him against the wall.

"Mike." It was her voice, so soft and sweet and full of need, as her hand found his and led him to the spot between her legs, hidden by soft pleats of fabric. "*I want you.*"

"El," he breathed.

He could almost see it, her body writhing over him as he pushed the fabric of her skirt up higher and higher and—

"Fuck!" He yelped as he came, his hips thrusting into his hand once as the proof of his lust for her splattered the shower wall. His breath

was ragged and he collapsed forward against the shower wall, forehead resting against the cold tile.

It had been a while since he'd given in like that, and guilt welled up in his gut.

Pushing off the wall, he rinsed it of any evidence of his transgression, frowning heavily. Making the water even colder, he turned the spray on himself to help cool his warm body and push away the images that he'd conjured. God, what was wrong with him? No matter how many times he refused to let thoughts of her take over, they somehow still managed to push through. Not even that Playboy hidden under his bed that Dustin had snuck him worked as well.

Why was he like this?

With a dissatisfied sigh, he smacked the temperature dial turning the water off, and slammed open the shower curtain, scowling at his reflection in the fog-framed mirror.

This had to be the last time he let himself slip. It wasn't fair to her and it was damn near killing him. All it did was make it harder to look at her. It wasn't going to happen. He needed to stop before it became too hard to ignore. Losing her because she one day found someone who actually deserved her would be be one thing, but losing her because he couldn't keep his urges under control? Unacceptable.

Placing his hands on either side of the sink, he stared at his reflection, glaring heavily.

"That was it," he told himself solemnly. "Seriously. No more." His reflection didn't look impressed and he scowled.

Dressing quickly, he threw on a pair jeans and his swim team hoodie before grabbing his backpack and heading to the basement. He ran through what he would say to her once they were alone, hoping that she would just accept his apology and not dig deeper into why he'd acted so stupidly. That would just start up another argument and he didn't want to do that again.

However he needn't have worry, because El was asleep, her small

body curled around her notebook, head resting on the arm of the couch. Mike thought she looked breathtaking, and couldn't stop himself from moving over to her and tucking a rogue strand of her long brown hair behind her ear. Who was he kidding? He'd never get over her for as long as he lived.

He sighed quietly and sat down next to her. Her petite frame taking up less than half of the couch in her curled position. A huge yawn escaped his mouth, and he stifled it as much as possible, not wanting to wake her. He pulled out his calculus notebook, and carefully extricated her's from her arms. She should sleep, and he needed to copy her notes anyway.

Even though they were in a fight, Mike couldn't help but feel happy. He had yearned for so long to have her close to him. Fantasizing about them seeing each other throughout the school day, doing their homework together, among many... other fantasies. And now she was here, asleep next to him. He would do whatever it took to keep it that way.

He set to copying her notes, trying to stifle another yawn. His eyes felt heavier and heavier as he worked. The room grew steadily darker despite the earlier hour due to daylight savings time, lit only by the few lamps that were required only thirty minutes ago. Mike found himself having to read the same lines over and over again as his body finally ran out of energy. He rubbed his eyes, letting his head loll back on the cushion. Shit, he was so tired. Mike decided to just rest his eyes for a minute...

...

He didn't know how long his eyes had been closed, but his neck was stiff and achy, his back as well. Lay down. That's what he needed to do. Mike moved, still too tired to open his eyes, bringing his legs up on the couch. There was something in the way of his chest, keeping him from stretching out fully, like a pillow or something. He grunted and shifted onto his side, slipping his body behind it, finally achieving his desired position. He was happy when the pillow moved in front of him, suddenly fitting perfectly against him, bringing him a comforting warmth. He snuggled himself closer to it and drifted off once again.

...

"Wake up sleepy heads," came a familiar voice in the distance. El was so sleepy and so warm. Why was someone waking her up? She snuggled her face further into the firm pillows she was holding, trying to remember if the couch had ever been this comfortable before.

"Fuck off," murmured another familiar voice, this one sounded as tired and as annoyed as El felt. The words rumbled against her body and she couldn't help but agree with the sentiment. Desperate to regain the peaceful slumber she'd been pulled out of, she shut her eyes tighter and let herself be pulled closer to the warmth.

"Mike!" It was definitely Dustin's voice. "You're like a brother to me, but if you think that we're all going to waste a perfectly good Friday night watching you and El sleep together, you're certifiable."

This certainly got her attention. El's eyes flew open and were immediately met by the Hawkin's high swim team logo. Apparently she had not been cuddled up against pillows as she'd thought, but rather Mike's chest, her head resting on his arm. Their legs were tangled together, and his other arm was slung around her waist. Likely what had pulled her closer just moments ago.

How they had ended up like this? The last thing she remembered was working on her homework by herself and getting really tired. When had Mike come down? He was mad at her. She was mad at him. How on earth had they fallen asleep in each other's arms?

"Mike?" she asked, having yet to move from their intimate position. Grogginess and confusion still winning over the shock of waking up tangled with the most confusing boy she'd ever met.

She pushed back to finally look at his face. He was watching her with cautious eyes. They were so close together. She could feel his breath on her face. "El—"

"That's right. Mike, El, Dustin, Max, Lucas, and Will. All of the party is present," Dustin cut in, gesturing around the room, annoyance heavy in his voice. "If you two could stop cuddling so we can get this

campaign started, that would be great."

Shit. The pair finally took in their surroundings. Dustin was standing above them, Will and Lucas already sitting at the table each wearing matching smirks while setting up for D&D, and Max, who was perched on the stairs and watching them with keen interest, her red eyebrows raised in curiosity.

They both shot up from their laying positions at the same time. Knocking into each other, legs still tangled, sending them both tumbling to the floor. Mike landed on top of El with an "oof!", both grunting in pain.

The basement erupted in laughter, and El wished she could disappear. But there was no way that could happen with Mike's weight pinning her down. The feeling of their bodies pressed together made something low in her stomach heat up. Her hand that had moved to his waist to push him off of her froze when it met his skin, his hoodie having ridden up in their scuffle, exposing several inches of his smooth skin.

She remembered the time she had run into him in the hallway right outside the bathroom, a towel slung around his narrow hips, his hair dripping water, his chest still gleaming from his shower. Her hands had brushed against him then too, causing a heat to pool low in her abdomen as her eyes traced the shapes of his lightly toned muscles, taking in the lines that hadn't been there before.

It was the same heat that filled her now and suddenly her entire body was a thousand degrees.

"Shit, sorry!" he apologized above, shifting over her to get his bearings and climbing off of her. His hip dragged between her legs and she had to stifle a gasp, quickly clenching her thighs together. He finally stood and offered her a hand up. She glared at him, confused and irritable, but took his hand and let herself be pulled to her feet. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine," she dismissed his concern, trying to ignore the burning in her cheeks and lower places. She was definitely more interested in the explanation of how they ended up on the couch together. There

was no question in her mind that she had fallen asleep alone.

"Mike can kiss it better," Lucas offered from the other side of the room with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Shut up!" Mike and Max yelled in unison. El was grateful for Max's willingness to help keep her boyfriend in check.

"I must have fallen asleep while I was working on homework," Mike spluttered quickly, his face the reddest she'd ever seen. "I came down here and you had already fallen asleep. I sat next to you on the couch to copy your notes. See," he directed her attention to the notebooks and calculators on the floor where they had just been laying. "I promise." He told her sincerely. Not only explaining it to her, but to their unwanted audience.

It was silent for a moment while El processed what he had just explained. It was all just an accident. He hadn't wanted to be close to her, it just happened when they were sleeping. Sometimes she found herself cuddled into her pillow having fallen asleep in a totally different position. It made sense.

"El, just make out with him already and put him out of his misery." It was Lucas again. "This is hard to watch."

"Shut *up*!" This time it was the combined voices of Mike, Max, and El.

Lucas only laughed and held up his hands in surrender. Dustin and Will had the decency to try and hide their chuckling, although they were failing miserably. These types of comments were becoming increasingly more common, and El wish they would just stop. It just made it *worse*.

"El, are you okay?" Mike asked again, taking her by the shoulders, but El knew he was actually asking if *they* were okay.

"Yeah," she answered quietly, shrugging out of his grasp. "I'm fine."

From the look he was giving her, she knew he didn't believe her.

Thankfully, Max suggested she and El go get a drink of water upstairs while the boys finished setting up the game, grabbing her hand and

tugging her towards the wooden stairs. El was happy to let herself be pulled along by her red-haired friend, grateful to be out of the basement and away from Mike, quickly racing up the stairs without glancing back.

She plonked herself down at the counter, her head falling into her hands, while Max grabbed a glass and filled it with water.

"You okay?" asked Max clearly concerned. El looked up, a flat look on her face, and her friend winced. "Okay, I know. Stupid question. Here."

She handed over the glass of water. El took a few long drinks. The cool liquid refreshing, helping clear out the rest of the haze that had remained from being awoken rather abruptly. When El still didn't offer up anything, Max added, "You looked awfully cozy down there."

"He's been a jerk all day," explained El, moodily.

"A jerk you're *attracted to* all day?" suggested Max with a suggestive raise of her eyebrows.

"Max!" She hadn't told Max that she thought Mike was cute for her to rub it in her face.

Feigning the high ground Max defended, "What? I'm right."

"We're just friends," El reminded her, using the same tired excuse. There was no use in discussing it further.

"Right, like me and Lucas are just friends," the redhead argued.

"You're *dating*. Mike doesn't see me like that. I've told you." How many times would she have to remind her?

This point merely earned her an exaggerated roll of Max's blue eyes. "El, he was just holding you against his chest. Cuddling you, actually. That was definitely cuddling. I would know."

"We were unconscious."

"Irrelevant. I know I'm right."

"Did he *tell* you?" asked the brunette. This was always the discussion ender whenever this topic came up.

"Well... no," conceded Max, "But—"

"Exactly," El sniffed, feeling very little satisfaction at winning the argument.

"Fine. Fine, I'll let it go," Max agreed. "I just wonder sometimes if Lucas is right, and you should just kiss him and put us *all* out of our misery."

...

Mike watched helplessly as El disappeared up the basement steps. Could anything else go wrong tonight? He hadn't had the chance to apologize to her yet for earlier, and now he'd basically assaulted her without meaning to. What's worse, he was having a hard time regretting it completely, his body still humming where they had been pressed together. God, he was such a dick. And there was very little chance of him being alone with her for the rest of the night to make his amends. How had he made such a mess of things?

Once the girls were gone, Mike looked around the room. The three other boys were wearing matching shit-eating grins. "Not a word," he warned them.

They appeased him in that they didn't say any words, but the roaring laughter made their rare obedience less satisfying. Whatever, they could get it out of their system now, before El came back. He didn't want any of them making her feel uncomfortable. He was doing a good enough job of that himself.

The boys settled down and Mike went into the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face. By the time he returned the girls had come back. Mike tried to ignore the pang in his gut when he noticed that El was sitting between Will and Max, putting two people between them on either side. She usually always sat next to him.

Mike shook it off. He deserved her distance.

Once the campaign got started, things got better. They all laughed at

his clever storytelling, working together to vanquish hordes of the undead and fight their way to conquer the final boss, the Lizard King. He'd written this one with Will's cleric levels in mind, knowing they would need to build him up in order to be able to actually win. They didn't play Dungeons and Dragons as often anymore, but this was the first Friday night since El had started school where they were all free. So it had been decided that the only way to spend it was with an old favorite.

It wasn't until they'd all taken a break to eat the pizza they'd order that Mike found himself dealing with the earlier events at school. El asked if anyone was going to the party next weekend after the football game.

"Oh, you mean the party at Hillis' house?" inquired Lucas. "It's kind of a lame party. How'd you hear about it?"

"Jake Struthers and Trevor McCalla invited her," explained Mike, and even he could hear the bite in his words.

El just shot him a withering look before explaining to the group, "Yeah, they mentioned it today. It's just that... I've never been to a high school party." Her voice lifted at the end, full of hope and longing.

"Lucas is right, it is pretty lame," added Dustin, and El visibly deflated. "*But...* it is free alcohol," he amended, sending a pointed look at the group.

Mike wanted to throttle him, why were they even entertaining the idea of going? But then Max made the strongest point, "We think it's lame because we've all been. Let's just go for a bit. Then El can decide for herself. Check the experience off her list."

El smiled at this.

"Sure," agreed Will. "Jonathan's in town that night, but the party won't start until after nine. I can meet you guys there."

Dustin added that he had to be at the game all night, because of marching band and made plans to ride with Lucas and Max, who had

volunteered that night to do concessions to raise money for the AV club, leaving only Mike and El.

She turned to him, her eyes wide and hopeful. Like he could ever deny her anything. "I'll give you a ride," he groaned, answering her unasked question with as much enthusiasm as if he was volunteering to get his arm surgically removed.

"Thanks, guys," El told them excitedly.

They got back to the campaign after that, but Mike couldn't muster his previous enthusiasm. His head too awash with images of Jake Struthers ushering El up Scott Hillis' grand staircase. The rooms that lined the hall there were the stuff of locker room legends. Something he was unwilling to let her become part of. At least he would be there to make sure it didn't happen.

The night ended. The party trickling out one by one. El was first to go, Hopper coming to pick her up at ten thirty. Mike wanted to walk her to the door, have an opportunity to finally apologize, now for a number of different reasons, but Max had hopped up to follow her and Mike gave up on the idea. Then Lucas and Max left, the latter needing to get home before her strict curfew of eleven o'clock. Will was next. Leaving just Mike and Dustin in the basement, finishing up what was probably their millionth viewing of Ghostbusters.

"So, are you really never going to tell El that you love her?" the curly haired boy asked as he rose from his spot on the floor, stretching.

"Dustin, fuck off."

"What?" he asked, feigning innocence, heading up stairs to the front door. Mike followed flipping off the lights as they went. "I'm just asking as a concerned friend."

Mike snorted and shook his head. "A concerned friend. Yeah. Sure. Save your breath."

"What are you so afraid of?" asked Dustin, stopping to turn and look at him as they reached the front door.

Mike sighed, they'd been over this before. "Oh, I don't know, that she

doesn't feel the same way," the taller boy ticked off, "That it will make her so uncomfortable that she'll stop talking to me. That she'll never want to see me again. That she'll feel like she can't hang out with any of you guys because then she might see me, and then she'll be all alone again, and she'll leave again and—"

"Okay! Okay, Mike. Point made," interrupted his friend. Mike settled now that Dustin finally seemed to understand. "I just *really* don't think that's how it will go."

"You can't know that," argued Mike, crossing his arms and leaning against the entryway wall.

Dustin was quiet for a second. "Yeah, you're right," he agreed, "but what I *do* know is this: in all the years we've known El, how many times have you found her asleep with me, Will, or Lucas? Or even Max?"

"...None," he admitted, moodily shifting his weight back and forth.

"Right, and how many times has someone found her asleep with you?"

Mike felt his cheeks burning as he reluctantly answered. "...Three times."

"See?"

"Yeah, but that was just because—"

"I'm sure you can explain it away like you always do," Dustin broke in, "but, Mike, when she's scared, who does she call for? Me? Lucas? Nope." He shook his head, his curls bouncing. "Or Will? Not once. And he's like a brother to her. Man, it's not even Hopper. It's just you. When she's afraid she wants *you*."

Mike listened to Dustin. Unable to come up with a counter argument. He desperately wanted what he was hearing to be true. "I—I don't know, Dustin."

"Okay," he conceded with a nod, "I just thought I should say something, because Lucas is right, it's getting painful to see you both

like this. But I'll make the guys lay off."

"Thanks," nodded Mike, as Dustin left, his mind half there. The other half still racing at what his friend had just said.

---

AN: There it is. I know. Poor, tortured Mike Wheeler. Hang in there with me. And as always, tell me your thoughts.

### 3. Chapter 3

**Author's note:** I know it's been a long wait for this next chapter. I've had a lot going on in my life. I lost someone dear to me, and it really took the joy out of writing for a while, then I got really busy. This isn't the entire chapter I was wanting to post, and maybe I should just wait until I have the whole thing done, but I thought I would put a little something out in honor of all of the hype coming from the Stranger Things Season 3 promotional video.

A great many thanks to WynnietheCat for being nothing short of miraculous with this half-chapter. She edits, creates, and inspires and makes my writing so much better. If you haven't already read her new story *Where I Belong*, I highly recommend it.

---

"Now, when is the party?" came Nancy's muffled voice through the phone. The twisted cord was just barely long enough to reach into El's room, and was currently in danger of snapping.

El sighed, and flopped down on the floor of her bedroom, taking a quick peek into the hallway to make sure the nightly news was still on, before grabbing her door and closing it as far as it would go. "Tomorrow night," she answered, her voice lowering. "After the football game. It's at this one guy's house... Hills... or Hillis?"

"Oh," Nancy replied, her tone one of recognition. "It's probably, Hillis. His older brother, Jason was on the basketball team with Steve. I've been to one of those parties before."

"Really?" asked El, relieved. She had been hoping to get some advice about how these parties worked from Nancy. El'd been trying to figure this out all week, but the boys were obviously no help, and when asked, Max told her that she usually just hung out with Lucas and made fun of the other people. Maybe now she would finally get her answers.

"Yeah, but only once. The Hillis' are rich and have this huge house,

with a pool in the back, and tennis courts, and people are pretty much all over the place. Inside and out, no matter how cold it is." El made a note to wear something that could keep her warm. "You're not going alone, are you?" added Nancy.

"No," answered El, "Mike said he'd drive me, and everyone else is going to meet us there."

"Okay, good. That makes me feel better."

El paused. "Why?"

"It's just at these parties kids get really drunk and things can get out of hand. Back when I was in high school, guys would make bets on how many girls they could get to go upstairs with them. It's just... you shouldn't go alone." She went quiet for a moment, before adding almost unthinkingly, "At least I know if Mike's there, he won't let you out of his sight." El felt her heart rate pick up. "He's always protective of you."

"Yeah," agreed El, deflating, her head falling back to rest against her bedroom wall. "He doesn't think I can take care of myself."

Nancy gave an unconvinced 'hmpf'. "I don't know if it's that he thinks you can't take care of yourself. More... he'd rather just do it for you." El furrowed her brow, trying to figure out what Nancy meant by that. "So, based on how annoyed you sound, I'm guessing my brother is still acting like a jerk."

El sighed, "Sometimes." The past week had been rough. Her usual defenses against her attraction to Mike had been steadily weakening since she had woken up in his arms. Despite her resolve to ignore it, her mind kept bringing her back to how it felt to be curled around his chest, what his body felt like on top of hers. It was distracting, and Mike hadn't been making it any easier.

"Have you talked to him about it?" asked Nancy.

El grumbled at this. "I *tried*, but he wouldn't talk to me."

She could hear Nancy chuckle on the other end of the line. "Have you tried communicating him using something other than words?"

"Nancy!" El flushed. Would people stop suggesting that she kiss him?

"Fine, fine. Forget I said anything. You just might make a lot more progress that way."

"Nancy, we're just friends." The sad truth of it.

"Alright, I'm dropping it," the older girl gave in, her tone apologetic. "Now, what are you going to wear?"

...

El stood in front of her bathroom mirror wondering if she was doing this right; the whole teenager thing in general. Her amber eyes stared skeptically back at her. She defeatedly blew a stray piece of her hair out of her eyes, feeling like a fool as she tried and failed miserably at making herself look... pretty.

The bottom of her closet was piled high with the clothes she'd tried on and then thrown off in frustration. She'd spent an embarrassing amount of time picking out an outfit, finally collapsing across her bed and staring sulkily up at the ceiling. *Nothing* looked good on her. Even her favorite clothes hung awkwardly on her frame somehow. She would never fit in. She would never be *normal*.

No wonder Mike hadn't told her she was pretty since they were twelve.

The thought had her jolting upright, cursing herself for even thinking it. She was sick and tired of caring what Michael Wheeler thought about her. Stomping her way over to the closet she ripped the blue dress that she'd only ever worn once because *Mike* obviously hadn't liked it, from the hanger and pulled it on.

*Forget Wheeler.*

*She* liked this dress. It made her feel pretty.

Now in the bathroom, El made herself take a few calming breaths before picking up the hot curling iron and doing her best to remember how Nancy had explained to touch up her long natural curls with the contraption. It had looked more like a torture device,

but it seemed like most beauty tools were. She still avoided eyelash curlers, deciding the hot metal rod she was currently holding was enough.

As she worked the curls, she stared unseeingly into the mirror. Her mind taking her back to the memory of waking up wrapped around *him*. The heavy feel of his arm curled around her waist, his warm breath on her forehead, pressed so close she could feel his heartbeat. Heat pooled low in her abdomen as her body reminded her of the other sensation she'd felt after they'd tumbled off the couch. Of his hips pressing between her legs, his weight over her, his eyes staring down at her, still hazy with sleep. A flush crept up her neck.

It was something strange, something new. Something only he made her feel. Something hot and fiery and burning and—

"Ouch!"

El yelped, pulling her hand back from the stupid curling iron. Her mind cleared as she realized she'd nearly burnt her finger tip right off. She groaned in pain and annoyance, putting the abhorrent thing down and quickly turning on the cold water to soothe her heated finger. It wasn't too bad, thankfully, but she was still angry at letting herself get distracted.

They were just friends. Nothing was going to happen. It wasn't possible.

Last Friday had sent her backwards a few steps in her quiet crusade of getting over her little crush on him. But that was... fine. She'd regain the ground soon enough. She just had to put a little more effort into not letting her heart race every time his hand brushed hers in the hallways at school, or when his thigh would press against hers under their shared desk in Calculus, or the way he'd put his arm around the seat behind her when they'd all squished into a booth at Benny's, his fingers tickling her shoulder. It wasn't his fault that he was so tall, and had long limbs, and needed to stretch out.

She couldn't decide if their accidental touchings were happening more frequently or if she was just noticing it more this week. It seemed like when he did stretch out, it was always in her direction,

his foot brushing hers or his hand catching one of her curls.

It was all in her head. It had to be.

She didn't have to wonder if they had been arguing more this week. The answer to that was a resounding yes. On Wednesday after school they'd sat in his car for over an hour, yelling back and forth about going to this stupid party. El finally telling Mike that if he thought the party was so lame, he didn't have to go and she would find a ride with somebody else. She'd slammed the car door so hard the whole sedan had jostled, turning and stomping away, walking to the police station in a huff and waiting there until her dad was off so he could drive her home. Mike hadn't tried talking to her again after that and she hadn't wanted to try either, nursing her hurt and anger like a bad wound.

The only words they'd spoken to each other since had been in Calculus earlier that day. They had spent the lecture sitting in a stony silence. El had done her best to ignore him, determined to keep her focus on the teacher in the dimly lit classroom as she wrote her notes from the overhead projector.

This all became far more challenging when Mike shifted in his chair, bringing his leg against hers, sending a burst of heat up her thigh. El had swallowed thickly, trying to calm her suddenly racing heart. It had made her annoyed and frustrated and... something else. How did he not notice? Was she really going crazy?

He hadn't seemed at all aware that they were touching, his attention completely focused on the lesson. Tucking a stray strand of her hair behind her ear, she scooted her chair away from him, crossing her legs and moving herself to the far corner of the desk, giving him all the space he needed. And giving herself a break from all of the... *whatever* it was that made her face hot and her hair stand on end.

After that, El had been able to keep her mind focused for the rest of the lecture, keenly pretending that the boy sitting next to her didn't exist. That was, until class ended when he made it impossible. She had been busy packing up her things, and was about to leave when he turned towards her in his chair, his hand coming to rest on the back of her's, effectively trapping her in. Surprised, she eyed the

territorial hand on her chair, her frustrated glare masking the surprising thrill that his sudden proximity brought to her.

"Tonight. I'm taking you to the party," he settled, as if they had been discussing the matter for hours. El could only gape, an odd shiver trickling down her spine at this tone of voice. Where was *this* coming from? She could only nod dumbly, not knowing what else to say, her wits suddenly nowhere to be found, the tone of his voice and way he was staring at her making her knees quiver.

Shaking the memory away, El gave her reflection one last moody glare before turning off the lights and heading to the living room. Hopper was with Joyce and some of their friends that night. Her adopted-father was under the impression that she would be going to a late movie and then getting something to eat with everyone afterwards, earning her a later curfew than usual. She didn't like lying to her father, but she couldn't imagine that he would have allowed her to go to a party where there would be under-age drinking.

Wasn't it a part of the teenage experience to lie to your parents about a party? Might as well get the full thing.

The clock on the wall reminded her that Mike would be there soon. Her stomach clenched, and she pretended it was caused by the nerves about the party. She stood listlessly in the middle of the room desperate to find something to do to keep herself busy, finally grabbing her scuffed white converse and lacing them up over her socks.

She watched the seconds hand tick around the clock, feeling like her heart was going three times its normal speed. What if the night was a total disaster? What if everyone could see right through her? Why had she even wanted to go to this party?

Her mouth suddenly felt dry and she was glad to have an excuse to go do something. El hopped up and went into the kitchen, getting herself a glass of water and guzzling it over the sink. She was having so much anxiety about the night that if Mike suggested that they skip the whole thing and stay in and watch movies until they were to meet up with everyone, she would gladly admit defeat.

She set the cup down and leaned over the sink, once again assessing her reflection, this time in the dark window. For the first time that night, El liked what she saw. Maybe she did actually look normal, like any other teenage girl, maybe even pretty. She'd been able to fit in at school for the past four weeks, surely she could figure out how to fit in at a high school party.

She could do this.

She was going to go to a high school party and have fun and maybe a different teenage boy would make her feel the way only Mike seemed to.

Looking closer at her reflection she realized she'd forgotten something important, the pink lipstick she had bought last weekend specifically *for* the party. Joyce had helped her choose between two shades. She'd said that it made her lips look like a rosebud. That had made El feel so happy, she'd bought it immediately, saving it for this special night.

She turned in the direction of her room when there was a knock at the door. The sound was so foreign in the quiet house that she startled. Frowning, she looked at the kitchen clock. It read nine fifteen, exactly when Mike said he would be there. El found herself suddenly annoyed at his characteristic punctuality.

Well, she wasn't going to sacrifice her lipstick for it. She hurried into the living room, his familiar dark head of hair just visible in the tiny window at the top of the door. Not bothering to greet him or even finish opening the door, she simply tossed a quick, 'I'll be right back,' over her shoulder before scurrying towards her bedroom.

She flicked the light in her room back on and began digging around in her desk, where she had stashed it.

"Are we going or what?" Mike called from down the hallway, obviously impatient.

El ignored him, continuing to fish around in the top drawer. She swore she had left it there. How could she have lost it already? She hadn't even opened it yet! Her hand dug under some flashcards,

finally feeling the familiar thin box. Smiling triumphantly, she pulled it out and tore open the packaging.

"El," he barked again.

Why was he in such a hurry to go? He hadn't even wanted to go to the party in the first place! Glaring in the direction of the living room, El responded by simply barking back his name with the same tone of annoyance, as she scrambled towards the bathroom, needing better lighting.

"Just a minute!" she yelled back, at the sound of his repeated complaint that she was taking too long. Could he not be patient for a second? Her hands were nearly shaking as she applied the pretty color to her lips, the shade matching her suddenly flushed cheeks. She growled, capping the lipstick and throwing it into the sink, figuring she could collect it later.

Clenching her jaw, she hurried to the living room, ready to snap at the boy who was waiting for her there.

"I'm coming," she bit out, grabbing her fur-lined jacket from her bedroom and pulling it on.

With a deep breath she headed down the hall.

...

Mike stood impatiently in the middle of El's living room, rubbing a tense hand over his freshly shaven jaw. He'd been standing there for five minutes while she did god knows what. El had been barely a blur when she'd let him in, turning and running before he'd even stepped inside.

She'd said she'd be right back. What was taking her so long?

He'd resigned himself to the fact that she was going to go to the party no matter how much he tried to reason with her... which had not gone well at all. His only consolation was that if he couldn't convince her not to go at least he could be the one to take her, keep an eye on her, and get the night the fuck over with.

"Are we going or what?" he called after her. Maybe she had changed her mind? Maybe he could convince her to stay here with him and watch movies until they met up with everyone. That sounded way more appealing than carrying around a lukewarm beer while random athletes he barely knew tried to convince him to ditch his friends to hang out with them just because he had a first place trophy or two. And the *girls*, Jesus, the drunk ones were the worst, hanging onto him and trying to drag him around, pouting and whining about being ignored.

Spending the night watching a movie alone with El instead? Snuggled up on the couch while she made him watch Princess Bride for the fifty millionth time?

He would choose that any day.

He paced the room waiting for her reply, tugging at the collar of his shirt feeling suddenly warm. What was taking her so long? She was the one who had wanted to go, and now she was making him wait?

"El," he yelled, not even attempting to hide his frustration. She simply yelled his name right back at him, and he fought the smile forming on his lips. He didn't want to be amused by her at the moment. He was still pissed about the situation, and from the sound of her reply she obviously was as well. That was fine. She could be pissed, as long as she stayed safe tonight.

He pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation. Fuck, she was going to be the death of him. Whether it would be from worry or sexual frustration, was still up in the air.

"I'm coming," he heard her call.

Finally.

Dropping his hand, he looked up to see her come around the corner. She looked far too beautiful than Mike was ready to handle in that moment.

Shit.

Definitely sexual frustration then.

Mike couldn't remember how to speak. His eyes raked over her, drinking her in like he was starving for water and she was a shining waterfall. Her long curly brown hair was full and soft, framing her face. Her pretty features were amplified by what little make-up she'd put on, but it was her lips, pink and full, that had him completely captivated, remembering how they tasted. The sudden desire to sink his teeth into them was so overwhelming he had to look away, feeling sweat prick his back, moving his gaze down lower, below her neck.

She was wearing that damn blue dress again, the one that had nearly made him crazy the first time he'd seen her in it. Her legs were tortuously bare and she was wearing her Chucks on her feet, socks scrunched up around her ankles, making it seem like she'd put little effort into looking totally and completely, distractingly beautiful.

He was a dead man.

There was no way she would go unnoticed at the party looking like *that*. Although that was probably what she wanted, to stand out at her first big social event. Mike felt a hot, jealous anger burn within him. Just *whose* attention was she trying to get?

When he did finally manage to speak, it was laced with the one-sided betrayal only a lovesick teenage boy could experience. "You look *pretty*," he accused, crossing his arms angrily.

El visibly bristled at his words. Her delicate features going from shocked to offended in approximately two seconds.

"Gee, thanks, Mike," she spat back at him.

Shit. "No, that's not—"

"Don't worry. I know you're just being nice. As usual." El cut him off with a stabbing role of her eyes. Before he could react, she had pushed past him, heading out the front door towards his car.

Mike felt his temper spiking. Anger was a far easier emotion to wrestle with than what he was currently feeling, and fighting was the only acceptable outlet for his tension. "I'm not just being nice," he

argued, catching up with her as they crossed the lawn to his car. "I'm never just *nice*."

"It's okay, Mike." she told him, refusing to look at him as he walked next to her. "It's fine."

Why was she being so stubborn? Couldn't she tell that he and every other goddamn male member of the Hawkins' high school population thought she was gorgeous. His frustration bubbled over.

"You know I think you're beautiful!" he spat out. El stopped walking and he nearly ran into her. She rounded on him. Her eyes teaming with annoyance. Good, he wanted a fight. He wanted her to feel as frustrated as he did, even if it was for different reasons.

"Why would I... *how* would I know that?" she asked him incredulously.

"Oh, come on. I've told you that you're pretty before," he countered defensively, as he continued around to the driver's side of the car. His mind racing, trying to remember the last time he'd told her that. It couldn't have been—

"Yeah, when we were twelve," she argued, throwing her hands out in exasperation, not moving from her spot on the lawn. "It's been a long time since then, Mike."

This topic was getting dangerous. They were treading far too close. He needed to change the subject. "Look, do you want to go to this party or not?" Mike asked irritably, running a hand through his hair.

She watched him for a moment and he held his breath hoping she would just let it drop. To his relief she merely let out a long sigh and nodded her head, climbing into the passenger seat.

Mike took a few deep, steadying breaths before joining her.

...

They took off in the same frustrated state in which they spent the past week. Mike was grateful for the low, staticky sound of radio filling up at least some of the heavy silence between the two of them.

The party was on the opposite side of town, near the country club, giving his brain plenty of time to replay the last twenty minutes over and over.

What the hell had he been *thinking*?

Well, he knew the answer to that question: he hadn't been. He'd taken one look at her and his brain short-circuited. He'd told her he thought she was beautiful... for the first time in *four* years. And he'd done it in the most asshole-ish way possible. He couldn't have been a bigger dick about it if he'd tried.

He didn't know which had been worse, letting the emission slip in his frustration, or the fact that he hadn't let it slip before...

Either way, he'd fucked up.

He glanced over at the girl sitting on the passenger side of the bench seat. She was staring out the out window, her brown curls curtaining her face, arms crossed in front of her chest, and legs crossed toward the door, as if she was trying to be as far away from him as possible. He felt a pang in his chest and quickly looked away, knowing he couldn't even blame her.

Mike stared tensely ahead. This was the answer to the hypothesis he'd been silently testing all week, the results being clear. She didn't see him as more than a friend. He'd been trying to figure out if what Dustin had said last Friday was true, so he'd stopped policing himself this week. Letting their hands brush in the hallways, sitting a bit closer to her than usual, resting his arm behind her when they were squished together on the couch, and gauging her response.

The only conclusion he'd been able to come to was what he already knew, he really *really* liked being close to her and she was completely indifferent. He must be some kind of masochist for getting his hopes up.

Now he'd hurt her *again* by telling her he thought she was pretty... or by *not* telling her she was pretty. He'd been sincere but obviously she didn't believe him.

He sighed, an expletive escaping on the quiet exhale.

"What?" El snapped, suddenly interrupting the silence.

"Nothing," answered Mike.

"You always say that. It's not *nothing*. You said something." Her voice was scathing. "I can tell you're mad at me. Stop being a jerk and just tell me," she challenged, turning to face him.

"I'm not mad at you," he argued back, feeling his temper rise at her baiting.

"Well, you're mad that I wanted to go to this party," she huffed.

"No, I'm not mad," he protested, "I'm just..." Jealous. He was overwhelmingly and unreasonably jealous. "...worried."

El shook her head, unsatisfied by his answer. "I already told you, I won't lose control—"

"No, it's not *that*," Mike interrupted, how many times would he have to tell her it wasn't about her powers? "It's just... teenage boys are idiots."

She sent him a pointed look. "Yeah, I know," she assured him, moving back to stare unhappily out the window. Mike gripped the wheel harder and ducked his head, turning the car into the long drive that led to Hillis' house. He deserved that. He knew he did.

Parking the car, he realized the chances of her actually listening to him were quickly fading, so he barreled on. "Look, just don't take a drink you haven't opened yourself or haven't seen poured," he warned. God, why had he argued with her so much, when he should have been telling her how to stay safe? His priorities were as fucked as his odds of her ever wanting him.

"I *know*, Mike. Nancy told me," she informed him, still staring out the window.

Pushing through her obvious annoyance, he continued, "And don't let a guy take you upstairs."

"I know," she repeated, unbuckling her seatbelt and reaching for the handle.

"Wait," he called. El turned back to him, her amber eyes angry and body tense, a silent warning to not keep trying, but Mike didn't care. "If a guy does anything to to make you uncomfortable, just use your powers to—"

"*What?!*" she cut him off. "No! I'm not using my powers," she argued as if he was crazy, scooting back toward the door. "You're just being stupid now."

"El, I'm serious!" he called after her.

She whipped around, her long hair flying as she turned back again, her eyes shooting daggers. "*I'm serious!* I'm not going to risk putting anyone in danger!"

Mike rubbed both hands over his face. Fuck, why was she being so damn stubborn! He took a calming breath, before turning to face her, reasoning, "Fine. Just promise me that you'll come to me if anyone is making you feel uncomfortable."

Something in the way she was looking at him changed. For moment she almost looked sad instead of angry. Mike felt a sudden emptiness when she turned away from him, muttering, "I don't need a babysitter, Mike."

The door slammed shut and she was gone, disappearing into the night and leaving him there feeling frustrated, both with her and at himself.

He was being a total dick and it wasn't even the usual antagonizing each other... he was just being a jerk. With a groan he slumped, his head thunking against the steering wheel. Okay, fine, he didn't want to be here and he didn't want *her* to be here, but it was too late to turn back. If she wanted to just have fun, fine. He could do that. He could relax his iron grip for one night and try to just... chill out.

With another reluctant, unconvinced sigh, he got out of the car.

---

AN: That's it for now guys. I'm still working out the party, and the events afterward, which I promise will bring relief to all this mounting tension. I know it's lots of arguing and miscommunication in the mean time so stick with me. What would you like to see at the party?